REVIEW OF *OPEN BORDERS*

> When the Berlin Wall came down, the whole world rejoiced. Onlookers said, "At last, the East Germans will be free"—not "The West Germans are about to lose their freedom to a horde of communist immigrants."[1]

Caplan believes that if someone wants to come to the US, our default response should be to let them. He clarifies the kind of "open borders" he supports as follows:

> Critics occasionally equate "open borders" with "no borders," but these are distinct proposals; an open borders regime could still have border checkpoints, require passports, and so on. The acid test, in my view, is that an open borders regime does not subject foreigners to any mobility restrictions *more stringent than natives face*. Thus, if a foreigner commits a crime warranting incarceration, an open borders regime could impose the lesser punishment of exclusion. Similarly, if a foreigner has a contagious disease warranting quarantine, an open borders regime could impose the lesser precaution of exclusion.[2]

There are two basic prongs to his argument, one ethical and one economic:

- Immigrating to rich countries would dramatically improve the lives of a large number of people currently living in poor countries, and we cannot morally justify stopping them.
- Letting them in would actually make us a lot richer, too.

For me, the ethical reasons are the decisive ones. Immigration restrictions are fundamentally based on violence: people who do not adhere are forcibly imprisoned or deported. I think violence should be assumed to be wrong by default unless very compelling reasons for its necessity have been presented. Do we have compelling reasons to keep most people out of the US by violence?

Some arguments for keeping people out seem morally bankrupt even if you grant their empirical assumptions. Suppose that, contrary to Caplan's economic arguments, more immigration *would* make current US residents much poorer and make our lives worse. That

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[1]Bryan Douglas Caplan, Zach Weinersmith, and Mary Cagle, *Open borders: the science and ethics of immigration*, ed. Calista Brill and Rachel Stark, First edition (New York, NY: First Second, 2019), 137.

[2]Ibid., 218.

would suck, but it wouldn't justify the use of force. I don't get to tell people from a neighboring city that they can't live in my city just because I'm afraid they'll compete with me—or my (hypothetical) children—for jobs. It seems equally unjustifiable to tell people they can't live in my country because I don't want to compete with them. (There might be an argument that it's even *less* justifiable: being kept out of the entire US puts you at a much greater disadvantage in life than merely being kept out of, say, Seattle would.)

Caplan addresses several other concerns, including:

- Too many immigrants arriving at once might cause chaos and overwhelm our infrastructure and institutions. Caplan does not think this would happen, because he believes immigration would only "*gradually* snowball"[3] if borders were opened up. He points to the history of migration from Puerto Rico into the continental US as evidence.
- Some people worry that immigrants cost more in public services than they contribute via taxes. Caplan cites studies indicating the opposite is true for most groups of immigrants (low-skilled *older* immigrants are the exception).
- The fear I hear the most is that immigration leads to increased crime. Caplan cites evidence to the contrary:
    - "Naturalized immigrants are model citizens, with *one-fifth* natives' incarceration rate."[4]
    - "Non-citizens' incarceration rate almost exactly matches natives'."[5]
    - "In 2016, the National Academy of Sciences scrutinized decades of research, concluding 'the presence of large numbers of immigrants seems to *lower* crime rates.' "[6]
- Would massive immigration sway elections? Caplan admits that "Democratic presidential candidates now do about ten percentage points better with immigrants than with natives,"[7] but argues that this needn't worry Republicans because immigrants' views on actual issues are very in line with natives' views. Low-skilled immigrants are an exception, though. Caplan gives reasons to doubt that they have much influence on public policy anyway, and points out that their descendants' views are in line

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[3]Ibid., 46.
[4]Ibid., 92.
[5]Ibid.
[6]Ibid., 93.
[7]Ibid., 114.

with natives' views, but I'm not sure his reply on this point will be very compelling for people who aren't already sympathetic to open borders.

- Does immigration threaten to destroy cultural cohesion? Caplan argues that descendants of immigrants have a strong tendency to assimilate, citing the remarkably high English fluency rate of even first-generation immigrant kids.

One chapter is devoted to the notion that, even if you think some of the concerns motivating limited immigration are valid, there are other ways to address those concerns. We could charge immigrants an entry fee or make them pay higher tax rates; restrict their access to public services; make them pass language or cultural literacy tests; make them jump through extra hoops to attain citizenship and the right to vote; etc. Caplan's not *advocating* for any of those policies, just identifying them as potential compromises that would be improvements over the status quo. Because the status quo is pretty extreme; lots of people simply have no legal route by which to live in the country they want to live in. Even offering them an unfairly shitty route would be an improvement.

The book is illustrated by the creator of SMBC, so there are some pretty funny jokes sprinkled throughout the drawings.